

Wildlands Trust

Duxbury Buys the Farm

Town Approves \$1.55 Million
to Help Preserve O'Neil Land

By KEITH L. MARTIN

Months of grassroots support to preserve the O'Neil dairy farm on Autumn and

Special Town Meeting

Winter streets paid off Monday night as

voters approved the town's purchase of development rights on the land at Special Town Meeting.

In an overwhelming yeas vote by citizens, Article 5 at the meeting passed with the required two-thirds vote to appropriate \$1.55 million in Community Preservation Act funds for an agricultural preservation restriction, preventing development on the 140 acres of land.

Mark Primack, executive director of the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts, outlined details of the project to voters Monday night and how Duxbury's contribution fits into his organization's planned \$4.3 million preservation of the last working dairy farm on the South Shore.

Calling Duxbury's contribution the first of a three-step process in saving the farm, Primack said that it was an important one to "make a connection between the food we eat and the earth that produces that food" and stressed that the rarity of the working farm makes it the last opportunity for the community to preserve this resource.

The agricultural preservation restriction, which prevents development and outlines uses for the land, will be held by Duxbury's Conservation Commission and the state Department of Agricultural Resources, from whom the Trust is seeking \$500,000 in grant funding. The restriction not only prevents development, said Primack, but also preserves the rural character of Duxbury and creates public access through walking trails that can coincide with the working farm.

With the restriction in place, said Primack, his organization can continue to raise the remaining \$2.8 million to complete the project.

"The town won't be asked to put in their money until all the other monies are available," he said, noting that it looked very good that the state grant would come through.

Primack added that the Trust was about \$1.25 million away from completing the purchase of the land and had received great support from individual donors through fundraisers like Saturday's wooden cow auction that produced \$51,000. The bulk of that money, \$50,000, came from one donor on one of the wooden cows, he said (see sidebar).

With funding in place, the third step, a charitable corporation, will be made up of members of the town and from the O'Neil family, including current owner and former Duxbury fire chief Carl O'Neil. Primack said that the corporation was the "best way to keep the land in agriculture."

"This is not just a Duxbury project, but an important project for generations," said Primack in closing. "This is the only opportunity on the South Shore to show our children what a farm is and connect with the earth."

Following Primack, Selectman Betsy Sullivan said the board asked a lot of questions about the Trust's intent before their majority vote to support the project and urged voters to support the article so the Wildlands Trust can continue their fundraising efforts successfully to complete the effort.

Members of the public who expressed their thoughts ranged in their support and concerns over the proposed large purchase for property rights on parcels the town would not own.

Recent Duxbury High School graduate Jennifer MacNab said the project gained her support as projects like this are what shape the town.

"I've heard many times that we are the town we are today because of the wise decisions of those before us and I [hope that continues]," she said.

Other speakers, such as Bill Campbell of Humphreys Lane, said he would be the "skunk at the church picnic" and said if the private land becomes public, then taxes in town would be on the rise as a result.

Judi Barrett of the Finance Committee answered that if the land is developed, then the occupants of those new dwellings generate service costs and raise taxes, so preserving the land had a smaller tax impact than new citizens moving in.

Perry Drive's Alison Rich stressed her concern that the town was spending too much CPA funds when months earlier it had cut funding to the library and the town's school department and that it was essentially spending money it did not have yet.

Earlier in the meeting, Community Preservation Committee Chairwoman Holly Morris and Town Accountant Sheryl Strother explained that if all the CPC-sponsored articles were approved, the money would not be there to support them as of the night of the meeting, but they would be there by the end of 2005 through surcharges and state matches of the Act.

O'Neil himself spoke about the future use of the farm and how it was his wish and will be his work on the charitable corporation, of which he is donating \$1 million, to ensure that dairy farming continue on the land. Sullivan added that the selectmen will play an active role in negotiating the future farming use of the land and that it remains in the best interests of the town.

After nearly an hour of discussion, the article was moved on and overwhelmingly supported by loud vocal "yeas" in the Performing Arts Center, followed by applause after the article passed.

After the meeting, Primack said that the vote would not have succeeded without the grassroots support, but knew that there is a lot more fundraising for his group to conduct to save the farm.

"What's wonderful to me and it happens only in the best projects, is that this has taken on a life of its own," he said. "There are people doing wonderful things for the project because they believe in it so it is very fulfilling and they were here tonight. This is a big boost, but it gets us to the next challenge of raising the private dollars and we're really going to need the public's help as private citizens in raising those dollars."

Farm Donation No Hay

The third cow's the charm.

That's the lesson the Wildlands Trust learned at the most recent O'Neil Farm Day this Saturday during the wooden cow auction.

While the first and second cows went for \$250 and \$170 respectively, a flustered auctioneer then announced that the third plywood bovine had just been bought for \$50,000.

The generous donation came from David Balboni, who almost a year ago to the date won \$4 million on a scratch ticket purchased at Osborn's. Balboni said that having ties to farm dating back to 1951 and working alongside owner Carl O'Neil, it seemed like the right thing to do.

"I enjoy the farm and didn't want to see it developed and would much rather see it be a farm for years to come," he said.

As for the expensive lawn decoration, Balboni said after winning the prize with his landmark bid, he then put it back up for auction.

"We've got plenty of cows around here," said Balboni of the farm. "I figured that this was the best time to make my donation to the Wildlands Trust and wanted to help out."

Balboni added his donation is just one part to ensure that O'Neil's property remain a working dairy farm for open space, agriculture and educational purposes.

"I've enjoyed working on this farm," he said. "I was at Special Town Meeting and cast my yea vote and this is all part to keep the place going and help kids learn about working dairy farms. You can ask a lot of them where milk comes from and they'll tell you 'from the store.'"

The two O'Neil Farm Days, sponsored by Citizens for Saving the Farm, raised a total of \$51,000 during the auction to donate to the Wildlands Trust as part of their private fundraising to purchase the 140-acre farm.

-Keith L. Martin



Wildlands Trust Executive Director Mark Primack and farm owner Carl O'Neil sit back and relax after citizens voted to approve \$1.55 million in town funds to prevent development on the 140-acre O'Neil Farm.